Book Review -- "Paul Joins The Scouts"

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

If you've enjoyed any (or all) of Michel Rabagliati's previous graphic novels, you'll love Paul Joins the Scouts, a French-to-English translation of Rabagliati's Paul au Parc (2011) recently released by Conundrum Press. Scouts is also a fine introduction to Rabagliati's signature virtues, including his penchant for sentiment, his supple cartooning, and his use of detailed, map-like panels to chart out the environments his characters inhabit.

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REVIEWS

Paul Joins the Scouts

Michel Rabagliati
Conundrum Press
$20, 160 pages
BUY IT NOW

REVIEWED BY CRAIG FISCHER JUL 19, 2013

If you've enjoyed any (or all) of Michel Rabagliati's previous graphic novels, you'll love *Paul Joins the Scouts*, a French-to-English translation of Rabagliati's *Paul au Parc* (2011) recently released by Conundrum Press. *Scouts* is also a fine introduction to Rabagliati's signature virtues, including his penchant for sentiment, his supple cartooning, and his use of detailed, map-like panels to chart out the environments his characters inhabit. Something does trouble me about *Scouts*, and about the trajectory of Rabagliati's career, but let me praise *Scouts* first.

Like all of Rabagliati's books, *Scouts* is semi-autobiographical. Paul—a Québécois kid who crushes on a neighborhood girl, reads *bande dessinée*, and participates in Cub Scout activities—is a stand-in for the cartoonist, and *Scouts* takes place during the years of 1969-1971, when Rabagliati and his avatar were between eight and ten years old. Much of the story is understandably filtered through Paul's point of view, but Rabagliati also includes scenes that focus on other characters and their unique circumstances, most notably four vignettes showing how Paul's scoutmasters move through their everyday lives and jobs. (The most edgy of these belongs to scoutmaster Jean-Claude, who is revealed to be gay and who bristles with righteous anger when his partner suggests that Jean-Claude is turned on by the cute Scouts "in their little shorts and scarves!" [80]) Additionally, Rabagliati chronicles how the political unrest in Quebec in the early 1970s (specifically the violence of the Québécois separatist movement, and the Draconian reaction to the separatists by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, dramatized in the picture below) affects even Paul and his friends. In *Scouts*, Rabagliati skillfully fuses autobiography and Canadian socio-political history into a compelling artistic whole.

Here on *TCJ* a few weeks ago, I wrote an essay about Rabagliati's work before *Scouts*, arguing that readers can assemble a rough but consistent chronology for Rabagliati/Paul's life from the events presented and alluded to in such "stand-alone" books as *Paul Has a Summer Job* (2002) and *The Song of Roland* (2009/English translation 2012). *Scouts* fills out the chronology further, showing us much more of Paul's childhood than we've previously seen. I also mentioned that Paul's father typically gets a lot more narrative attention from Rabagliati than Paul's mother, but that too is corrected in *Scouts*, where Paul's mother Aline is portrayed as a vivacious young wife frustrated by living in an apartment next door to two nosy relatives, one of whom is Paul's great-aunt Janette, "seamstress, hat-maker and old maid" (17), who we've seen previously (as a much older person) in *Paul Moves Out* (2004/2005). The pleasures of the *Paul* series are two-fold: each individual graphic novel has a proper beginning, middle and end, and can be read on its own, but those who read the entire series notice reoccurring characters and motifs and can assemble a broader picture of Paul's life.

One plot thread is Paul's emerging awareness of himself as a comics artist. At the beginning of *Scouts*, Paul is a devoted reader of the French-language comics anthology *Spirou*, and after reading a book titled *How to Become a Comic Book Artist* (featuring interviews with and advice from cartoonists André Franquin and Joseph "Jijé" Gillain), Paul draws his own *Spirou*-influenced comic strips, with mixed results. Here are Paul's parents trying to suss out one of his drawings:

This might be a bit of self-consciousness on Rabagliati's part, since he's evolved into a supremely legible

cartoonist, one who uses every line, pattern and tone to construct naturalistic people and environments, even while guiding readers towards narratively relevant details. In many of Rabagliati's panels, faces and word balloons are in plain black-and-white, popping out against backgrounds in various shades of gray, although he'll drop white into the backgrounds when he wants us to pay special attention to elements of his *mise-en-scène*. Near the end of the book, Paul visits one of his scoutmasters, Daniel Sabourin, and a large panel gives us a panoramic look at the basement of Daniel's family home:

Several bright, white posters behind Paul and Daniel show off Daniel's commitment to the 1960s counter-culture: in addition to the ubiquitous Che, there are images ("Presse ne pas avaler," "La lutte continue") created by the Sorbonne students who participated in the Parisian riots of May-June 1968. Other details in white include a Picasso poster, a record album of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's children's book *The Little Prince* (1943), a poster for the Québécois separatist party RIN (Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale, active between 1960 and 1968) and a copy of the separatist magazine *La Cognée* (1963-67). Throughout *Scouts*, Rabagliati uses visual detail, dialogue and captions to define Daniel as a 1960s Québécois radical, a fact which (along with *The Little Prince*) feeds directly into one of the book's climaxes. Rabagliati knows how to tell a layered, affecting story, and *Scouts* rewards close reading.

Weirdly, though, the essence of my complaint about *Scouts* is exactly about Rabagliati's ability to create well-wrought graphic novels. Rabagliati has mastered and repeated certain literary devices—the highlighting of details, the repetition of motifs—to the point where I feel as if I've seen most of his moves. The first page of *Paul Goes Fishing* (2006 / 2008), for instance, poses a narrative question ("What does the priest find in the collection box?") that remains unanswered until the book's finale, as does the first page of *Scouts*:

Why is there a sneaker hanging on the branch, and why is it important? Rabagliati favors stories "bookended" by similar images at the beginning and end, and in addition to the sneaker bookend, there are other images and situations (Paul sitting in the park—hence *Scouts*' French title, *Paul au Parc*—and the theater performances Paul attends early and late in the book) that give unity to the narrative. There's nothing wrong with Rabagliati's continued use and refinement of certain storytelling devices; the creators he likes best (Hergé, Goscinny and Uderzo) each established formulas for an extended series, and then spent their careers working within the parameters of their series. If Rabagliati does the same, if he gives us ten more graphic novels in the same mode and as accomplished as the other *Paul* books, I'll be overjoyed. But I also wonder what he might create if he suddenly abandoned his formulas, if he scuffed up the legibility and precision of his art and refused to structure his stories so tidily. I'd love to see Rabagliati take his Detour.

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2 Responses to *Paul Joins the Scouts*

Walter Biggins *says:*
Jul 22, 2013 at 3:16 PM

First things first: For new readers, what follows is a sort of spoiler alert.

OK. Craig, thanks for these great Rabagliati essays. I do have to quibble with your interpretation of the "sneaker" bookend, b/c I think what Rabagliati's doing here is very important and in many ways a **subversion** of his aesthetic. In **Paul Goes Fishing**, the bookend indicates a kind of resolution to the story–Paul's prayer gets answered. In **Scouts**, that seemingly innocuous sneaker is, by the 2nd time we see, an image that's sickening and deeply unsettling. (I mean, let's face it: There's probably part of a dead child's foot in that sneaker.) The **narrative element** gets resolved, in the sense that we understand the image better the second time around but its impact lingers and is destabilized. The closing images are actually Rabagliati's portraits of those poor boys' potential futures, what they wanted to become as adults, and what they'll never get to grow up to be. We see a mirage of what could have been, but that sneaker image (pun intended) stomps down that possibility in a horrifying way. The book basically ends with the Boy Scout troop dwindling away into nothingness, with a lot of loose ends that Rabagliati DOESN'T tidy up neatly. What happens to Daniel? What happens to the other scoutmasters? The rest of the kids–what of them after this fades? There's an aura of

bleakness and the decided lack of resolution in the final pages here, a lack of resolution that the sneaker bookend kind of mocks. Because, I guess, there's some things that we don't quite get over, that don't conclude cleanly.

Speaking of horror, I'm growing to really like how Rabagliati handles violence. For all the benign and cheerful nature of his UPA-influence art, his stories have a surprisingly large amount of grisly violence in them. The bird shot dead in **Paul in the Country**, the torture of rabbits and Alice's miscarriages in **Fishing**, the car crash that ends **Scouts**: All of these things resonate. Part of the reason they do so is because, especially with the car crash and the miscarriages, they seem to come out of nowhere, out of narratives that WERE ambling along gently up to that point. I suspect that's the way real violence erupts in our otherwise placid lives. It's weird that we see that so readily not in crime comics but in the serial narrative of a middle-class Montreal boy/man.

Craig Fischer *says:*
Jul 23, 2013 at 11:06 AM

Walter, thanks for the insightful comment, and sorry about my delayed response. I was away from my computer yesterday.

I think we're in relative agreement about the "sneaker bookend." In my review, I note that the explanation Rabagliati provides for the image of the sneaker at the end of SCOUTS gives "unity to the narrative," but that's not a claim about how readers respond to that unity. I had the same response to the story as you did: I was (and am) haunted by the deaths of the people in the car, even as I appreciated the formal elegance of the question-and-answer "Why is the sneaker important?" bookend.

And certainly there are lots of threads at the end of SCOUTS that aren't neatly tied up. In the wake of the tragedy, the troop just dissipates, fades away—though you yourself point out that there's some brutally definitive closure too, when the lives of the kids are snuffed out. Also, Paul's dramatic arc goes from joining Scouts to leaving Scouts, which is a pretty traditional beginning-middle-end trajectory, no?

There IS violence in Rabagliati, and in SCOUTS it's complimented by a harsh view of family. There's a tendency in Rabagliati's earlier GNs to idealize and sentimentalize his family (especially his dad) but in SCOUTS there's real tension between Paul and his sister (I hope we read more about her in future books), and Paul's parents and the intrusive aunts. There's a toughness and cynicism in SCOUTS for sure, and not just in the unexpected violence.

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